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Illinois Wesleyan Welcomes Record Number of International Students

Aug. 18, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— As a record number of young adults from China, Vietnam, Nepal and several other countries take their first steps as students at Illinois Wesleyan University, a cadre of veteran staff and students help the newcomers acclimate to life on campus.

Illinois Wesleyan is welcoming the largest number of first-year international students in the University's history – 74 students, with 53 of the new students coming from China. The 74 new students this year compares to 49 students in fall 2013.

University officials attribute the growth to several reasons, including the increasing size of a Chinese middle class; Illinois Wesleyan alumnus Adam Guo '10, an **International Admissions** Representative in China; and the word-of-mouth recruitment of Illinois Wesleyan alumni influencing young people in their personal circles of friends, family and co-workers.



Xinyi Zhang '18, Ruttanun Vilailuck '18, and Pam Reece, deputy city manager of the Town of Normal, mingle at the home of friends of IWU

International Student and Scholar Advisor Reenie Bradley leads the way in building confidence and helping calm jitters among the new students. International Student Orientation is the first in a host of programs and activities throughout the academic year. The formal orientation program takes place over five days. This year Bradley was assisted by 14 current international students offering their best 'been there, done that' guidance.

"Our goal in orientation is just to get everyone's confidence up before the Americans arrive," said Bradley, who has worked with international students for 21 years. From mundane but critically important activities such as banking and shopping at Target, to bowling and tasting root beer for the first time, the new students take small steps in adjusting to campus life before tackling classes and homework assignments.

"I think what gets us off on the right foot is that I simply ask for their trust before the students even get here, and in return I'm honest and I ask for their honesty, too," said Bradley. Email exchanges between Bradley and the new students before their arrival helps to answer basic questions about clothing and climate: yes, Illinois winters are cold, but there's no need to bring heavy clothes and a coat ahead of time. Bloomington-area stores are well stocked. And no matter how much Bradley prepares them ahead of time, air-conditioned buildings, blue skies and the quiet tranquility of the IWU campus are still marvels for those who have lived their lives in cities with poorer air quality, more noise and hotter temperatures than central Illinois.

"The cultural adjustment is a process, and even though today's international students are tech-savvy, well-traveled and ready to go compared to students in years past who showed up with little more than the clothes they traveled in, there is still adjustment," said Bradley. As the fall semester progresses, Bradley and the first-year international students talk openly and often about the process of adjustment.

"They will get through it, but it has to happen at their pace," Bradley said. "I think they handle homesickness better than the American students because the international students have been preparing for years. Homesickness can sneak up on the domestic students, who just kind of go off to college without thinking about it very much.

"College is a cultural adjustment for everyone, so when you think about it that way, all of our first-year students, regardless of background, have a lot in common," Bradley added.

Finding commonality with her classmates was important for Brigitta Jakob '17, who came to Illinois Wesleyan from Indonesia. Jakob had been a high school exchange student in Iowa, where she was first introduced to Midwestern friendliness. By the time she arrived at



Linda Zhang '18 and Shirley Li '18, both from China, share a laugh during orientation sessions.

IWU as a first-year student, Jakob greeted everyone she saw with a hearty 'Good Morning,' regardless of whether she'd ever seen the other person before.

"When I see a stranger, I am throwing smiles everywhere so I can make as many friends as possible," said Jakob, who assisted with this year's orientation for the new international students. "I tell the new students not to just group together all the time with their same nationality. That slows the adjustment process. If I hang out with only the other international students, that doesn't enrich my knowledge about my surroundings."

Connecting with the other new students usually happens first, however, and that was the experience of Analeigh Dao '16 from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Dao recalls the Friday night bowling event during International Student Orientation as the 'epiphany moment' when she realized she had much in common with new friends from China, Morocco and Germany.

"We were all so terrible at it," she said of her group's first experience hurling a brightly hued, 16-pound resin ball down a wood lane. "We were so bad all we could do was laugh, but it was so much fun. I think it was the first time I realized 'I am not alone in this' and I knew I could succeed here."